

Shateyyaronyah (Šaʔteyarḡnyes)

Leatherlips

A Wyandot Chief

DATES c1750 – 2 June 1810

WHY FAMOUS?

A man of widely known integrity and friendship yet executed by men sent by Tecumseh & the Prophet who falsely accused him of witchcraft because he opposed to going to war with the United States.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Šaʔteyarḡnyes (modern spelling) was a Wyandot of the Porcupine clan and a noted warrior. Because he was a signer of treaties, including the Greenville Treaty, it is likely he was also a clan chief and possibly a war chief.

His clan name translated as “halfway up the sky” or “two clouds of equal size.” In his later years, he was also known by the name Souchaetess, “long gray hair.” But his most famous name was the one bestowed upon him by the white settlers of Ohio: Leatherlips –because he was said to be unable to tell a lie, his lips like leather, only allowing the truth to pass.

Known as a man of integrity and a good friend to both Indians and whites, Šaʔteyarḡnyes counted Chief Tarhe, Roundhead, and Splitlog as relatives because they were of the same clan.

His integrity would be what doomed him to death. At Greenville, he had pledged, along with the other signers, to never again take up arms against the United States. Chief Tarhe was of the same mind. In fact, all signers of the treaty of Greenville kept their pledge.

His clan relative, Roundhead, sided with the Tecumseh and his brother the Prophet Tenskwatawa (both of whom had *not* signed the treaty) as they worked to form a pan-Indian alliance to oppose the increasing encroachment upon Indian land. Their efforts would lead to war.

However, war with the Americans went against the pledge made by Šaʔteyarḡnyes and Tarhe. Unfortunately, Šaʔteyarḡnyes (Leatherlips) did not have the same political protection as his relative, Chief Tarhe.

“His only crime was honesty, and the honourable character which he had acquired.” – John Heckwelder

DETAILS OF TRIAL/EXECUTION

The public reason for Šaʔteyarḡnyes’ subsequent trial and execution was witchcraft.

Witchcraft was the misuse of power for one’s personal gain. It was an incredibly serious offense, punishable by death.

The accusations would follow the legacy of Leatherlips into the modern day, despite everything about witchcraft being counter to his very character. He was not, and would never be, a witch.

Politics shrouded in drama to obfuscate the truth. Šaʔteyarḡnyes needed to die publically before his opposition would wound the floundering alliance the Prophet was helping his brother build.

Four (or possibly six, the accounts vary) Wyandots, who had sided with Tecumseh and the Prophet, were sent to carry out the deed. The leader, called the “captain” delivered a painted piece of bark to Šaʔteyarḡnyes, The painted tomahawk signified death. He, bound by a symbolic cord, sat surrounded by the accusers. He met their accusations and supposed evidence with calm replies.

As the onlookers watched, the steadfast warrior accepted his fate. But Leatherlips’ friends had one last bargaining chip: John Sells offered up his horse worth about \$150 (close to \$3700 today with inflation) in exchange for Leatherlips’ life. After careful deliberation, the captain and his men rejected the offer.

Šaʔteyarḡnyes prepared himself for death. He washed then dressed in his finest clothes before painting his face. He then shook hands of the white spectators but for Sells, he accorded him a Wandat blessing.

As he headed to his grave, probably dug by the accusers as he prepared, Šaʔteyarḡnyes sang his death song. At the grave itself, he knelt and said a prayer to the Great Spirit. The captain then joined him and prayed again.

According to eyewitness accounts, the captain pulled out a tomahawk and struck Šaʔteyarḡnyes’ head with a mighty stroke. Howe says instead of dying outright, he lingered and had to be struck again. He was then buried in the grave prepared just steps away from his cabin.

WHO KILLED LEATHERLIPS?

While the Prophet is ultimately responsible for his death, controversy has lingered over who physically killed Šaʔteyarḡnyes.

Tarhe, Roundhead, and Scotush were often suggested but as clan relatives, the first two would never have agreed. Besides, Tarhe shared Šaʔteyarḡnyes’ political leanings and no less famous a personage than General William H. Harrison (soon to be the U.S.’s 9th president) was sure Tarhe was not involved. William Walker, Jr. vehemently denied that Scotush could have been involved, either.

In fact, Walker named Peter Gould, a Michigan Wyandot and loyal follower of Tecumseh and the Prophet, as Šaʔteyarḡnyes’ executioner.

Yet without Otway Currey’s 1838 article about “The Doomed Wyandot” few would have reason to ever remember this principled man and friend to Indians and whites alike.

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